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LENTEJUELAS

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Art
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

by E. Vicente Martinez

July 1997

Thesis Board Members ;

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_____ date _____

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THESIS

In this paper I will fulfill partial requirements as stated in the graduate hand out: "Summary of MFA Degree". I will provide a "coherent and informal discussion of my artistic work and process," and "place the thesis project within the larger context of historical and contemporary art," by evaluating my influences : my upbringing in a Hispanic, Roman Catholic culture, my struggle with my sexuality, fantasy as a form of escape from reality, and the role of decoration in my life and work. I will conclude the paper with a discussion of each piece.

In this body of work I celebrate my culture and lifestyle. The pieces glisten with a myriad of embellishments such as sequins, spangles, rhinestones, prisms, pearls, feathers and satin. The elaborate decoration of the artwork is an essential element of the content because the enticing sensuality of the materials acts as a vehicle through which the viewer can vicariously experience elements of a lifestyle that may be unfamiliar to them

As I tried to understand my obsession with decoration, it became obvious to me that these feelings had been with me always. My attraction to decoration began during my childhood in Cuba and the Cuban neighborhoods of Miami. I remember fancy Cuban birthday cakes, men

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and women wearing lots of gold jewelry that sparkled in my eyes, shiny new cars, and beauty pageants with women dressed in glamorous gowns. In my mind, decoration became synonymous with beauty, and I wanted everything around me to be beautiful. In my adolescence, I achieved this by doing a lot of daydreaming, my escape from a confusing reality. I would imagine being in complete control of my life, living in a place where I could express myself in the most uninhibited and purest form, without worries or prejudice. Even back then, years before I accepted my sexual orientation, I knew I was different. Unfortunately, this difference contradicted everything I was being taught, hence creating confusion and insecurity in my life. In part, my work style or technique, is attributed to a freedom that was oppressed a long time ago.

Sharing similar cultural traditions, the work of Pepon Osorio has been an influence for me. He uses decoration to express his experiences as a Puerto Rican living in New York. This expression comes out in three ways: "in the use of the miniature, which deflates the ineffable qualities of the thing being remade; parody in the form of grotesque or excessive exaggeration; and a use of multiples and industrially produced objects that become visual signs for the many meanings that can be ascribed to any one thing" (Fusco, Coco 1991 "Vernacular Memories" Art in America). His pieces are encrusted with fabric, fake pearls, dominoes, flowers, religious iconography, plastic toys and tassels. In my work, Quinceañera and Gauyabera translate bittersweet memories and experiences of my cultural traditions. These pieces represent an

affirmation of my heritage carried forth with pride and personal reflection
They offer me a sense of identity , a place in my culture and in society

Another influence for me has been certain aspects of the philosophic role and function of decoration in architecture. I have adopted part of the same thinking in my own work . For example , the architect , Robert Venturi said that "less is a bore", which was a sharp contradiction aimed at the Modernists' minimalistic attitude set forth by Ludwig van der Rohe who said that "less is more ". In the nineteenth century, the qualities associated with decoration were beauty, happiness, and pleasure .The Victorians felt that with the more decoration, the more beautiful everything would be. Later, the Modernists revolted against ornamentation, and architecture became simplistic

This revolt against Minimalism was paralleled in the 1970 's with a group of artists that began to incorporate decoration and pattern in their work Mexican tiles, American quilts, and ethnic art were just several of the influences spawning this new acquired interest in decoration. Artists began meeting together in groups to discuss issues of ornamentation relevant to their work. Eventually, as this art form got better known , it was called the "New Decorativeness" or also known as " P & D " (pattern and decoration) Some of the people involved in this movement were artists such as , Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt , Jane Kaufman , Rodney Ripps , Joyce Kozloff , Miriam Shapiro , and Jennifer Cecere .

As I grew older and began making art, my childhood ' over-exposure ' to elaborate decoration within my culture began to manifest itself in my work. Although I am a candidate for an MFA in photography, my artistic background is in ceramics and mixed-media. I studied ceramics as an undergraduate where I made heavily textured and ornate forms. During my fellowship from 1988 - 1990 at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, I took workshops in book arts, photography, basketry, weaving, beadwork, and surface design. Once again, everything had substantial decorative elements. It was at Penland that I first learned the importance of process. I must pay close attention to detail because the aesthetic quality of the work is crucial to the success of the piece. My feelings were substantiated by an interview in American Craft with textile artist, Jason Pollen. He says about his work, " Stitching, weaving, building something up layer by layer, row by row, knotting, making carpets---- it's all the same thing. Although this process is repetitive, it can be mindful rather than mindless. When you get quiet and just do one stitch at a time, or one leaf at a time, there's this great vitality, this great energy, that can come through. " (Paine , T. Janice 1994 " Fragments in Composition " American Craft) For instance, "Marilyn " would not function as well as it does if I had not glued each sequin individually. I did it this way because I wanted to achieve a visual quality that wouldn't be possible if I had carelessly thrown the sequin all over. This was a long and tedious process, but it was worth it because the piece emits an aura that would not exist otherwise.

In my private life I have used fantasy as a form of escape from a reality filled with cultural and religious expectations, prejudice, and even hate. Now, using fantasy as an important element in my work I am able to release stifled and repressed ideas and experiences from my youth, and deal with them in a spontaneous, whimsical, and honest way. Watching old movies depicting the great stars of Hollywood when it was glamorous and wonderful has always been an escape for me. Diana Vreeland wrote in the preface In a Glamorous Life, " Everything was larger than life. The diamonds were bigger, the furs were thicker, and more. The silks, velvets, satins, and chiffons, and miles of ostrich feathers. Everything was an exaggeration of history, fiction, and the whole wide extraordinary world. The eye traveled, the mind traveled in a maze of perfection and imagination" (LaVine , W. Robert 1980 In a Glamorous Fashion , New York : Scribner) The energy and excitement that inspired her words, also inspired this body of work, especially the drag queen pieces.

I have been "out of the closet" for over ten years. But I struggled with gender roles and sexual identity when I was growing up. I was in denial of my sexuality, because I was taught, like all good Catholics, that homosexuality was a sin. By coming out, not only would I risk rejection from the church, but more importantly, from my family. When I was young it seemed essential to suppress my feelings and live by religious and cultural standards. Now, I feel a sense of freedom having come to terms with my sexual orientation I felt a need to re-evaluate everything I was taught as a Cuban and a Catholic. Self-acceptance was the most

important factor. When that happened, understanding everything else was easy.

I went through a process of self-exploration as I tried to understand who I was and what that meant. As I immersed myself in a gay lifestyle , not only did I find a direction in life, but a purpose. I wanted my work to be flamboyant and I wanted to feel uninhibited. I wanted to scream to the world that I was gay and I was Cuban and very proud of it. My work needed to reflect this pride

MARILYN

Transformation and illusion are key elements in my work. They deal with the idea of decoration as beauty. This is especially significant with the drag queen pieces because both subjects were men pretending to be women. I gained respect and inspiration from witnessing their metamorphosis. The hair, the false eye lashes, the heavy, but flawless make-up, the padding, pulling, tucking, plucking, shaving and waxing, the stockings, the large earrings, and the highest heels all fuse together to create a fantastic illusion. I chose to view this transformation as an extreme act of decoration.

I wanted glamour, elegance, power and sex appeal. At the photo shoot, the subject was consumed by the character, "she" had obviously

done this before. Her house was the perfect setting because it was furnished with antiques encrusted with cherubs, gaudy candelabras, gilded mirrors and damask covered furniture finished off with fringed piping. Embellishing the photograph with thousands of red sequins gave a resplendent effect and provided the subject with the attention she demanded. I used a swagged drapery treatment, in red satin, that puddled to the floor, and I accented this with gold cherubs to finalize the seductive and glamorous starlet theme.

I achieved the theatrical drama I was looking for Especially when I lit the piece with a single spotlight . I wanted to capture that old Hollywood glamour effect One of my favorite aspects of this piece was the patterning created by the thousands of sequins that surrounded the image. This was a result of laying the sequin side by side. This patterning was reminiscent of the mosaic quality of Joyce Kozloff's tile and grout works

SHOWGIRL

My feelings toward "Showgirl" were slightly different than the "Marilyn" piece because I had read an inspiring article on Havana's showgirls. A highlight of the article described an evening at the famous Tropicana Night Club: " When the Tropicana is going full tilt, it's a feverish spectacle, too much for the eye to take in all at once -- an explosion of

Caribbean Carnival exuberance, erotic suggestiveness, balletic grace, Afro- Caribbean rhythm, and bring - down - the house Broadway excess and professionalism" (Francisco , Goldman 1993. "Caribbean Rhythm" Harper's Bazaar) I was so fueled by the article, that I wanted to embrace some of that exciting energy for the "Showgirl" piece.

Another source of inspiration for "Showgirl" was the work of Jane Kaufman . When I saw her curtains and screens made of pearls , gold wire , glass beads , and feathers, I immediately thought of showgirl costumes Kaufman's work is luxurious and sensuous , the same qualities I was looking for in my work " Showgirl " possessed a sensuality that compelled the viewer to touch it and even a desire to wear it I can relate to these feelings as I felt the same way about Kaufman's work

The familiarity the audience feels with showgirls functions as a door into a new experience. Initially, the viewer does not identify the subject as a drag queen, but is seduced by the sensuality of the feathers and pearls. The viewer enjoys the piece for its decorative beauty and may imagine themselves with the head-dress on. Then the viewer steps closer to examine the photographs and sees the character is a drag queen. For many people, this image is incongruent with the image of showgirls they had in their head and will cause them, hopefully, to re-examine their thinking. My hope is that during that transition of thought, they can remember the enjoyment they had felt a moment ago and come a step closer to understanding this lifestyle unfamiliar to them.

GUAYABERA

Guayabera functions on two different levels for me. On the one hand, it is a personal statement about machismo. The shirt is embellished with sequins, spangles, and feathers to camouflage and distort the masculine power that it exudes. On the other hand, it stands proudly as a vernacular tribute to my heritage

As my Guayabera underwent it's transformation from store - bought item to art object, and as I researched its origins, my initial feeling began to shift, adding even more meaning. The resplendent quality of the sequins, combined with the image of the Cuban flag, and a patriotic theme, gave the shirt a sense of pride and elegance. It took on a deeper significance as an homage to my homeland and to all Hispanics.

My inspiration for this piece was " La Bicicleta " by Pepon Osorio. He decorated a bicycle with ribbon, flowers, beads, tassels, and plastic kewpie dolls. "La Bicicleta " served as a tribute to Puerto Rican street vendors whose bicycles were always embellished with objects, giving them a personal style of their own. For Osorio this piece was based on

childhood memories of the artist "Guayabera" shares a similar purpose for me.

"Guayabera" was part of an exhibition at El Museo del Barrio in New York City, titled " Recovering Popular Culture" In an essay written for the show catalog there are a few items that validate my intentions with this piece. The author writes that my work "questions inherited cultural ideas and icons" She goes on to say that the work "proposes the realization that cultural traditions need not be static and rigid but rather a vehicle for change and transformation". (Escalante , Nellie. El Museo del Barrio , "Recovering Popular Culture" , 1994)

QUINCEAÑERA

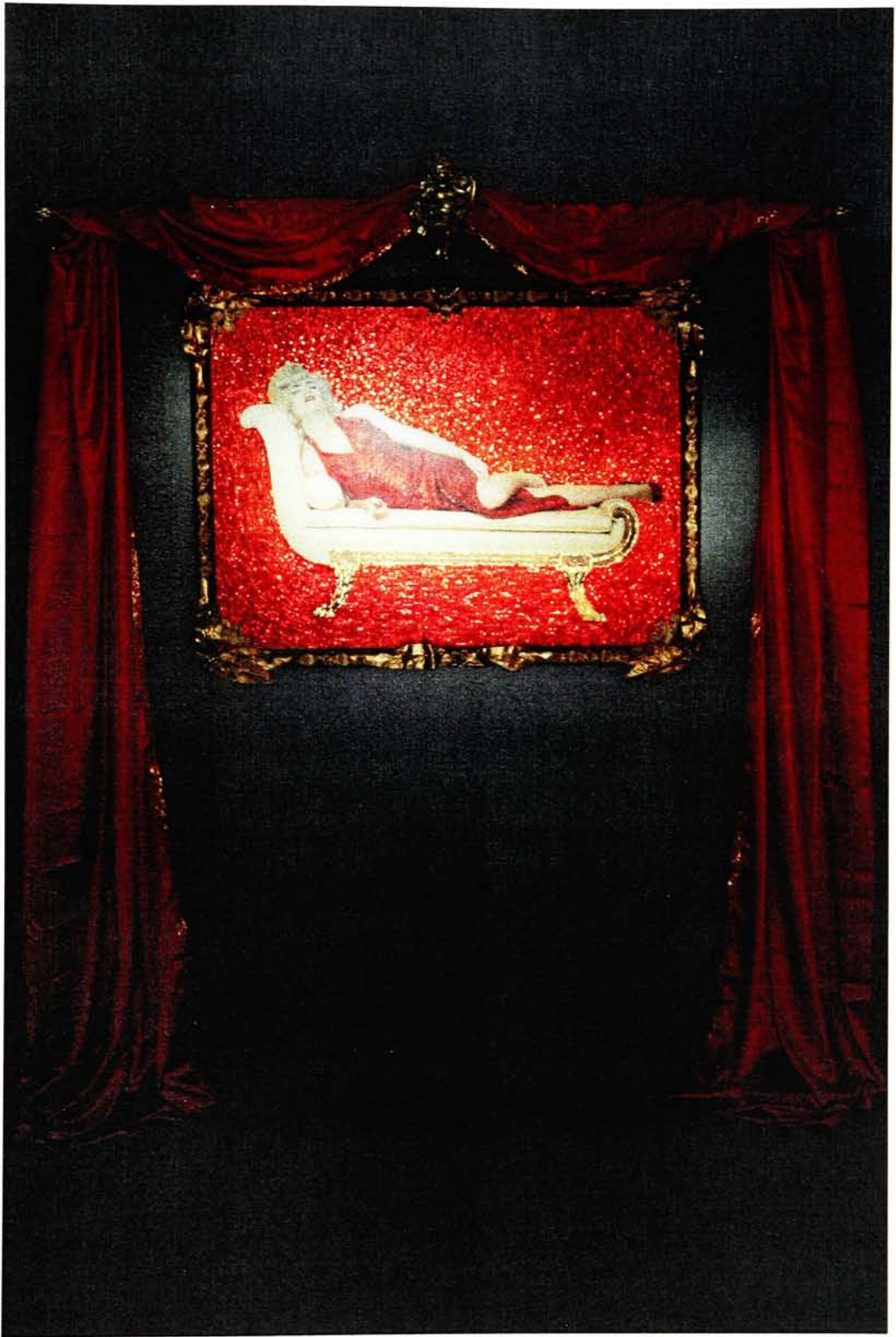
A Quince is an elaborate celebration that marks the coming of age for Hispanic girls. This event takes place on their fifteenth birthday, and the girl is known as the Quinceañera. This is a strong tradition very much alive today as it was when I was growing up. In some Hispanic cultures, there is a religious significance to this rite of passage, but all the Quinces' I ever attended were purely festive . An art critic described my piece as being " equal parts loving tribute and gaudy overstatement ". This piece definitely represents my pride as Cuban

I wanted to create an ambiance for the viewer through "Quinceañera". It was my intention to allow the viewer to walk around the entire installation . All the white lace, pearls, rhinestones, and tulle, alongside the flowers, the lighting, and the red carpet treatment set the mood for something pure and celebratory. Similar to those feelings you can experience at a wedding

The center piece resembled a three tiered cake, and it was covered with large amounts of glitz . The top tier was a crown, smothered in rhinestone. The second tier had a pair of clear plastic high heels that were completely covered with rhinestones, as well . The bottom tier was held up by plastic figurines of men in tuxedos . The shoes and the tuxedo men were representative of the Quinceañera's coming of age. They symbolized her potential for courtship.

The center piece, including the hoop dress, sat on a stage trimmed in tiny white lights. It was like a tabernacle on an altar . The concept for the execution of this piece was heavily influenced by the work of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt . I admired an installation by him titled , " Two Seconds Before the End of the World " . This was a mixed media piece decorated with plastic flowers, foil, glitter, and lights . I was specifically attracted to the overall aesthetic quality of that installation .

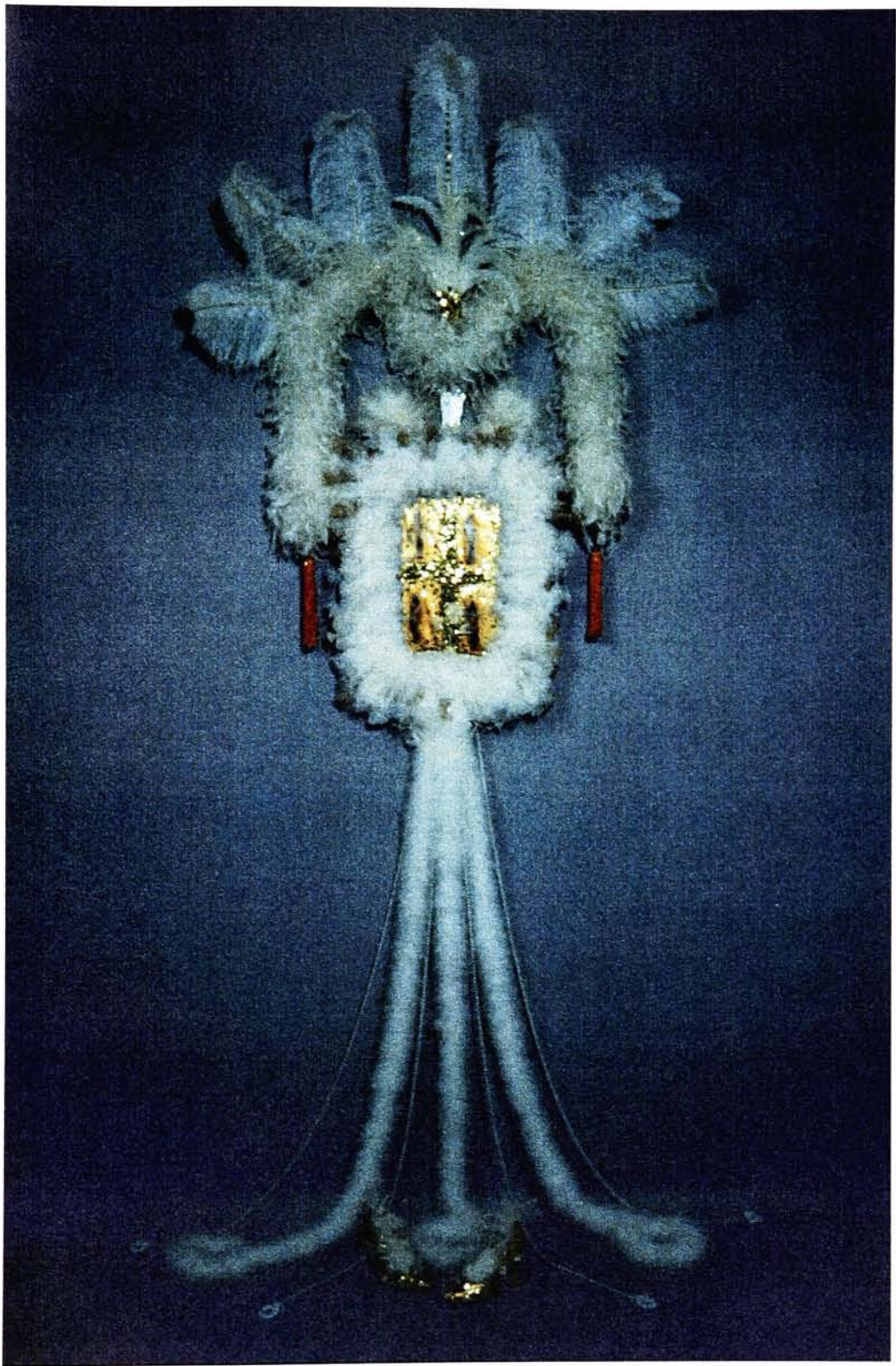
Confronting my sexual orientation and religious beliefs make up my artistic expression . Catholicism, gender roles, fantasy, and decoration are all influences that at different levels have had an impact on the way I view society and the world, hence the way I live my life . This body of work, " Lentejuelas ", which means sequins in Spanish , represents the glitz and the celebration that I associate with the gay and latin culture



1 a . M a r i l y n



1 b. Marilyn (detail view)



2 a . S h o w g i r l



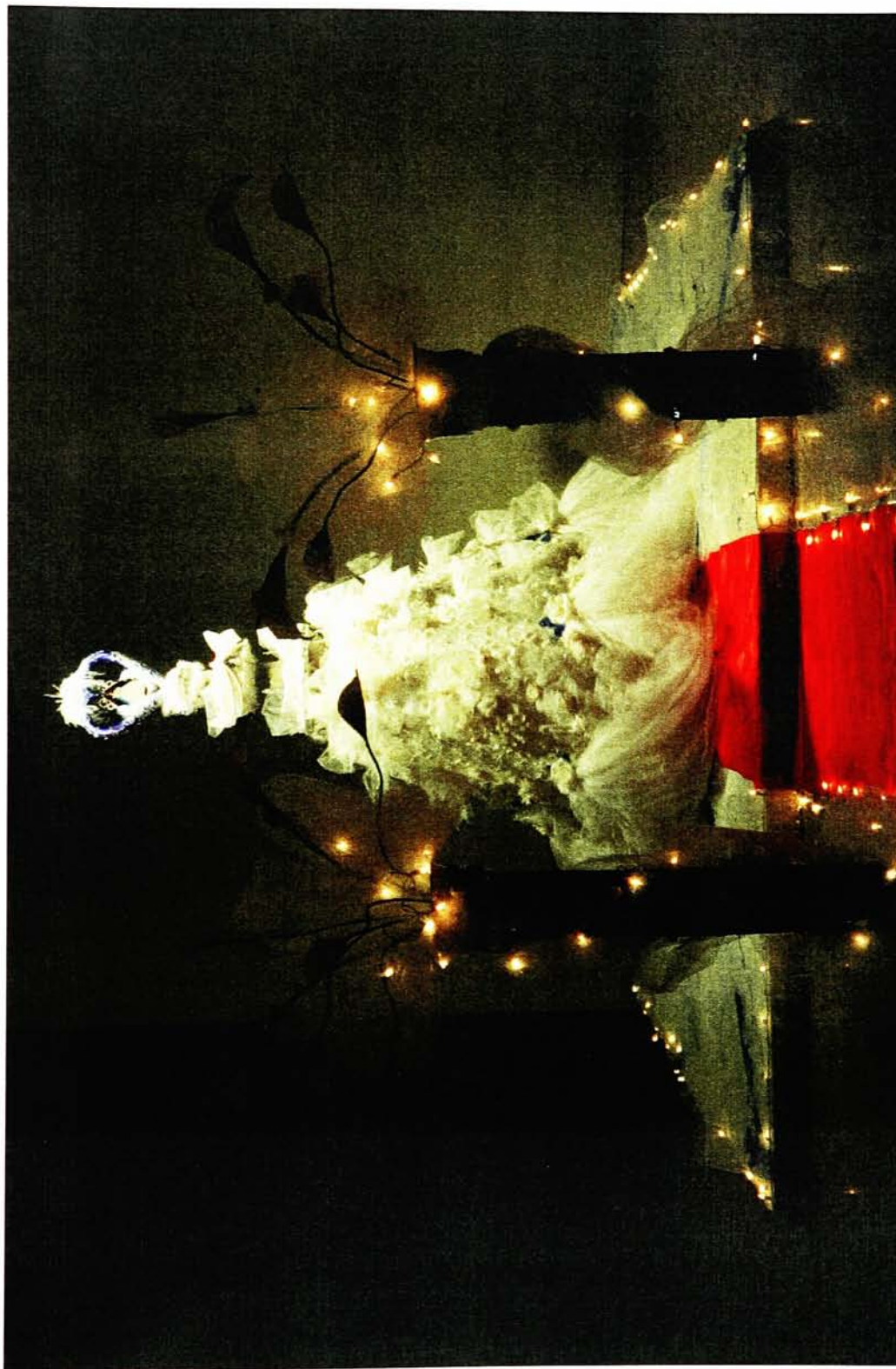
2 b. Showgirl (detail view)



3 a . Guayabera (front view)



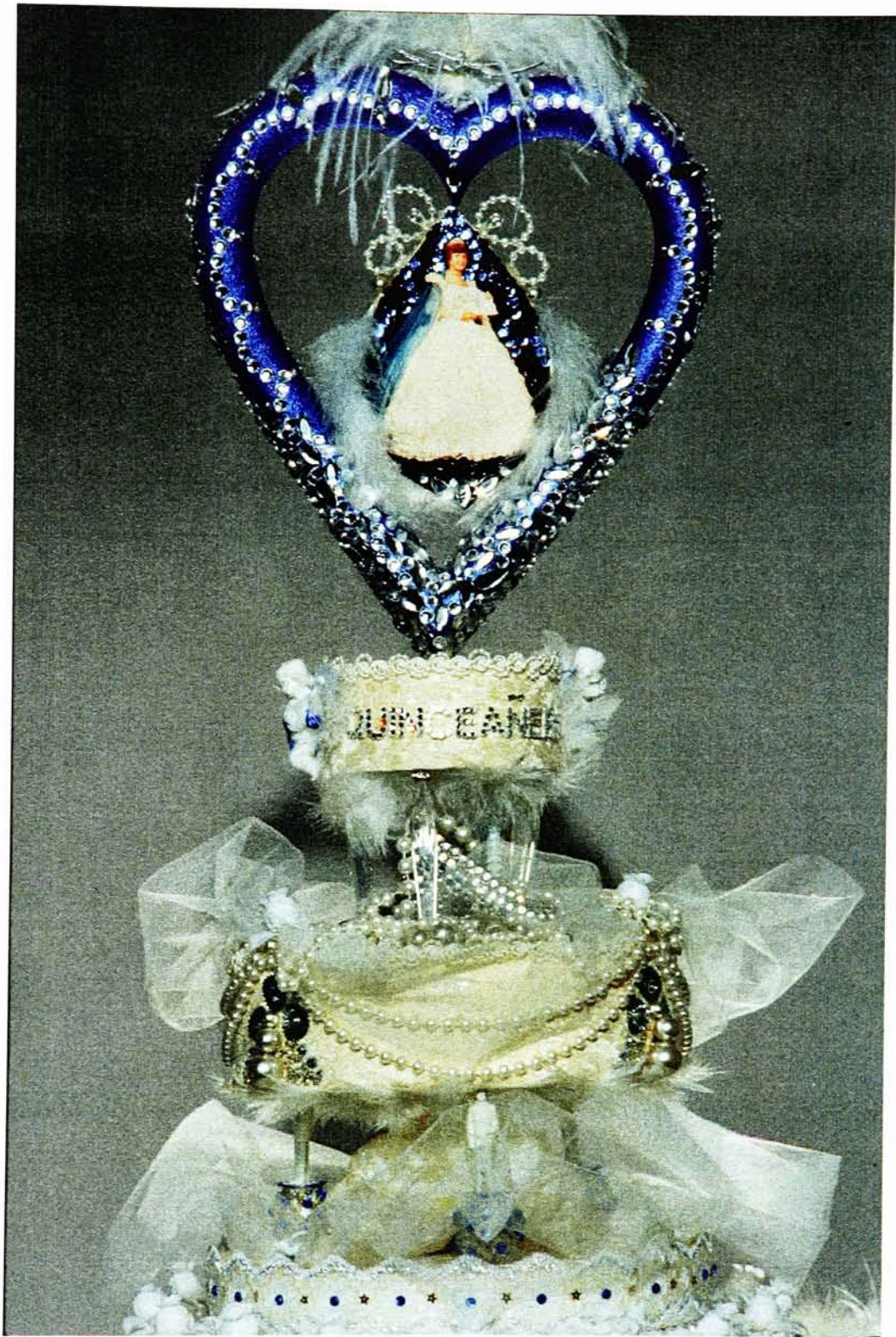
3 b . G u a y a b e r a (b a c k v i e w)



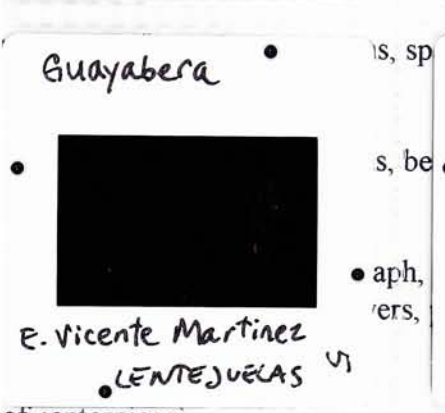
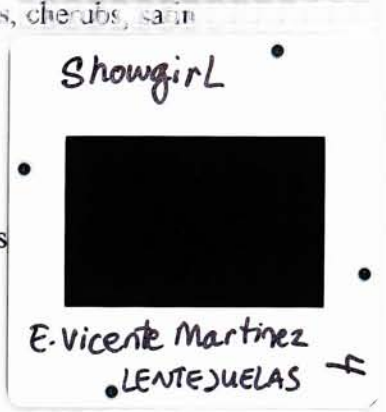
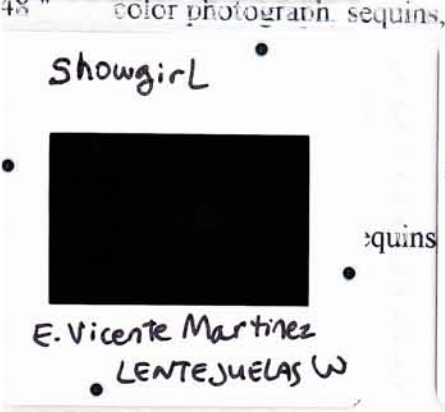
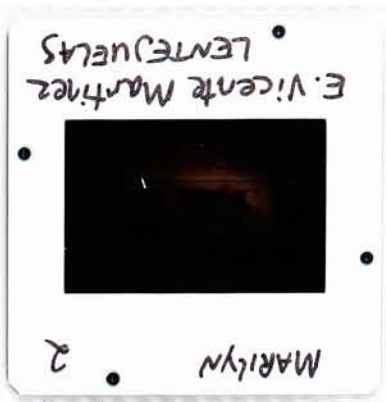
4a. Quinceañera



4 b . Q u i n c e a ñ e r a



4 c. Quinceañera (detail view)



Slide List

1. Marilyn 24" x 48 " color photograph, sequins, cherubs, satin
2. Marilyn (detail)
3. Showgirl 60" x 132" color photograph, sequins, pearls, rhinestones, feathers
4. Showgirl (detail)
5. Guayabera (front view) 24" x 36" sequins, spangles
6. Guayabera (back view) sequins, beads, pom poms, feathers
7. Quinceañera 72" x 60" x 132" color photograph, sequins, pearls, rhinestones, lace, tulle, silk flowers, plastic figures, lights
8. Quinceañera (detail of centerpiece)
9. Quinceañera (detail)